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RUEKJCS/OSD WASHDC
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RHMFIISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHMFIISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUMICEA/JICCENT MACDILL AFB FL
RHMFIIU/COMSOCENT MACDILL AFB FL
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2459
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 2648
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 001821

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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RELEASABLE TO NATO/AUST/NZ/ISAF

STATE FOR SCA/FO, SCA/A, S/CRS, SCA/PAB, S/CT,
EUR/RPM
STATE PASS TO USAID FOR AID/ANE, AID/DCHA/DG
NSC FOR AHARRIMAN, KAMEND
CENTCOM FOR CG CFC-A, CG CJTF-76, POLAD

E.O. 12958 N/A

TAGS: PTER ASEC MARR PGOV AF
SUBJECT: PRT/KANDAHAR - DEALING WITH THE TALIBAN
"SPRING OFFENSIVE"

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. The "spring offensive" announced by Taliban leaders in southern Afghanistan a month ago appears to be picking up momentum. During the previous four months the Taliban engaged primarily in small hit and run attacks and improvised explosive bombings, and this remains their primary tactic. The increased number of suicide attacks remains deeply disturbing. However, in another move, they recently amassed a force of 50 to 100 fighters in a cluster of villages along Highway One about 25 miles from Kandahar City, reportedly to prepare for attacks in Kandahar. On the orders of Governor Asadullah Khalid, the Afghan National Police (ANP) launched a pre-emptive attack on April 14 which resulted in a report of up to 41 Taliban and four ANP killed. (Note: In a later meeting with Embassy officials, Asadullah revised the number down to about 25. End note.) Canadian forces were called in after the battle became protracted and the ANP began to take casualties. While the initiative of the Afghan authorities in tackling the Taliban is admirable, this battle showed that adjustments will have to be made to deal more effectively with the Taliban "spring offensive." END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Kandahar Provincial Governor Asadullah Khalid told Regional Command South on April 11 that he had received reports that a significant Taliban force had moved into the area around Sangisar in

preparation for attacks on targets in Kandahar (he did not know which targets had been selected by the Taliban). This area was once one of Mullah Mohammed Omar's headquarters and has long been suspected as being a center of remaining Taliban support. Khalid mentioned that he planned to have the ANP search the villages in question and arrest any suspected Taliban later in the week. He said that he would be in contact with Canada's Task Force Orion to request back-up support. However, this was not done in advance; the Coalition forces were called in only after the operation was under way.

¶13. (SBU) On the morning of April 14, the ANP launched the mission and came under fire almost immediately. According to the initial count by the ANP, the firefight, which lasted into the early evening, resulted in the deaths of 41 Taliban and four ANP deaths - although the number of Taliban killed was later revised downward to around 25. Further inquiry by CFC-A revealed the final number is likely much less than 25. Similarly, although the press reported that the Zherai district chief of police was killed and the district administrator was wounded, our information indicated that both were wounded. Canadian forces, which were operating nearby, were called in by Afghan authorities and surrounded the villages. The Canadians then fired on several compounds.

¶14. (SBU) On Saturday, April 15, the Taliban launched a series of hit and run attacks on several police posts along Highway One (part of the national "ring road"). This stretch of road has historically been a hotspot for Taliban activity, and Taliban

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leadership have expressed an intent to increase activity further in this region in an attempt to isolate it from the surrounding areas. No ANP were either killed or wounded in these quick hit and run attacks. Afghan officials told us they believed the attacks were a face-saving effort by the Taliban, who had taken a humiliating defeat in one of their historic areas of support.

¶15. (SBU) Subsequent to the April 14 battle, the Commander of Task Force Orion met with the Governor and top police officers to discuss the need for closer coordination in advance of such operations.

Comment

¶16. (SBU) There are some noteworthy good news items in these events. First, people in Kandahar are increasingly willing to provide the provincial authorities with information on Taliban activities. Second, the Afghan authorities and ANP are willing to assume primary responsibility for providing security. Third, the capabilities of the ANP are improving - they had pinned the Taliban down before calling in the Canadian forces. Fourth, so far this year, the Taliban do not appear to have the capability to recruit or field as many fighters as they did last year.

¶17. (SBU) Beyond the good news, however, the GOA will need to make significant adjustments to its tactics. First, the ANP and ANA, which currently lack an effective Quick Reaction Force, will have to plan for larger pitched battles. This winter the Taliban preferred to fire a few shots and flee rather than stand and fight when confronted with significant Afghan or coalition forces. While this remains their primary tactic, they are now more

frequently challenging the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) as they present softer targets. Second, Governor Khalid and the Afghan authorities will have to coordinate more through the nascent Provincial Coordinating Center that has been set up to help coordinate intelligence and the activities of Afghan security forces and Coalition Forces in Kandahar Province. Finally, inadequate supplies of ammunition and weapons at police outposts along the ring road may make them tempting targets to the Taliban who have no doubt heard of these shortages. Increased weapons and communications equipment for the police outposts are likely to be top priorities on the list of security improvements that Governor Khalid and the other governors are planning to put together at the April 25 Southern Governors' Conference in Kandahar (other priorities are, or should be, addressing corruption and irregular pay for the ANP). The primary purpose of this conference is to develop a common set of security plans and requirements which the governors intend to present in Kabul at the ministerial level as soon as they can make appointments. End Comment.

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